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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some misconceptions about Asian American elementary school and secondary school students, and describes ways of building effective communication with the families of these students. The essay begins by noting the stereotyping of Asian American students as "whiz kids" and discussing the damaging effect of that characterization for individual Asian American students. In reality, many Asian American students are not intellectually gifted, and many difficulties and problems exist among newly-immigrated families. A second section gives an overview of some key Asian American cultural values, focusing on views of family and the relationships between parents and children as they differ from mainstream U.S. culture. Also considered are Asian American parents' attitudes toward school, their expectation that schooling should be in the hands of educational professionals, parental sacrifice for children, and parents' imposition of guilt on their children. Recommendations for improved practice include language help with communication for parents, staff training in Asian American and Asian culture, special orientation for Asian American parents, school communication and interaction with the Asian American community, and face-to-face conversations and home visits. Included are 10 references. (JB)

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REACHING OUT TO THEIR CULTURES

--Building Communication with Asian-American Families

Recent research findings have indicated that Asian-American students are not all "whiz kids" and that American teachers have stereotyped images of these children (Schneider & Lee, 1990). In addition to the family pressure for excellence, Asian-American students have to cope with unrealistic expectations from teachers.

Reality and Fantasy

There is a large percentage of Asian-American students who are not intellectually gifted; some Asian-American students, especially among those from newly-immigrated families, have various kinds of difficulties and problems. The "whiz kids" image can be a terrible liability for those students who are not academically inclined, especially when teachers assume that children from certain Asian-American groups will be top achievers. Gifted or not, Asian-American students are frequently caught in the fast lane of parental pressure, teachers' unrealistic expectation, and peers' misunderstanding. The needs of Asian-American students are not readily apparent. It is easy for teachers to spot language proficiency problems, but it is much more difficult to identify internal conflicts in students (Pang, 1990).

Some scholars have tried to attribute the academic attainment of Asian-American "whiz kids" to the influence of Asian cultural values, child-rearing practice, parental socialization, and family expectation. Others have even prescribed a recipe for raising academic achievement of American students by proposing selective adopting Asian cultural values (Mordkowitz & Ginsburg, 1987; Schneider & Lee, 1990). No doubt, culture is an important factor in Asian-American students' achievement, but the effects of culture have been confounded with the consequences of the society. Most studies that examine the relation between cultural values and achievements have yielded low correlations. Compared with students of other ethnic groups, Asian-Americans are different only in that they seem

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to be more likely to believe that success in life has to do with things studied in school (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). It is beyond the scope of this article to argue how cultural practices and group's societal status interact with each other. However, simplistic cultural explanations not only erroneously strengthen teachers' deindividuated view and stereotyped images of Asian-American students, but also induce Asian-American parents to maintain and reinforce some of their cultural practices. Those practice are not compatible with the values and beliefs of American society especially when Asian-American parents are misled to believe that these cultural features compare favorably with those of other groups (Ferdman, 1990).

Children's Studies: A Cultural Obligation

The Confucian ethical code, which is the essence of most Asian cultures, holds that the first loyalty is to the family, even above their allegiance to country and religion. The family represents a religious, economic, political, and social unit. As a result, there is among all family members a strong bond which is focused on maintenance and perpetuation of the family as a strong unit under any and all circumstances (Pang, 1990). Academic achievement and upward mobility are not viewed by Asian parents as personal matters but part of their children's obligation for the maintenance of the family. Asian parents view their children as something like their investment, something which is related to their own honor, pride, and happiness. Failure is difficult to accept because it would be their own failure. Poor grades, therefore, are viewed as culturally unacceptable behaviors. Parents would do whatever they think effective to avoid failure. Ends certainly justify means; whatever they do is considered as being for the good of the child. Whatever parents tell children to do is, traditionally, nonnegotiable and it is children's obligation to follow their parents' directions.

Argument seldom happens in Asian-American families simply because the egalitarian relationship which provides the basis for family discussion in most American families seldom exists between traditional Asian-American parents and children. What implied in the classic Twenty-Four Chinese Models of Filial Piety is one word: OBEDIENT. Parents'

Recommendations

In order to deal effectively with Asian-American students' problems, there are a few points educators should remember. Successful solution of many of their problems depends on whether educators are able to build communication with their families. The crux of the matter is to facilitate school involvement of their parents, especially those of newly-immigrated families.

The first problem encountered by most of school personnel is, perhaps, the language barrier. It is not uncommon for official notices to go unanswered. One way to solve the problem is to ask parents who immigrated earlier to help interpret to more recent immigrants. If bilingual staff members could be employed, it would be much easier to communicate with those parents.

School personnel should familiarize themselves with Asian cultures. In-service training should be organized for staff members who are involved in working with Asian-American students.

It would be ideal to have orientation for Asian-American parents as well as children concerning school policies, classes, extra-curricular activities and so on. However, in many cases, it is not easy to do. School personnel need to establish strong community-school cooperation and develop school-home liaisons as important resources. Communication could be established with much ease through help of those who immigrated earlier. School should consider cooperation with community as a component part of its routine work which is vital to the success of educating minority students.

School personnel's initiative to remove the cultural barrier is always very rewarding. Home visit is culturally viewed as a sign of sincerety. A face-to-face talk during home visit is much more effective in disarming doubtfulness than a conference in the office. The same with Asian-American children. Inviting them to discuss with you privately in a casual setting would put them at ease. They need to be encouraged and feel culturally secure before they can speak out their problems.

domination is looked upon as protection and love. Should a child raise a question about parental love, it would be viewed as disrespectful and a sign of ungratefulness to parents--in one word, blasphemous. Parents' reaction could be extremely negative.

"Work Works": Asian-American Parents' Belief

Asian-American parents may not be as interested as White American parents in involvement in school activities, but that should not be interpreted that Asian-American parents do not care about their children's education. Culturally, they are just accustomed to granting the responsibility for education to teachers and view all educational issues, be it curriculum or discipline, the province of school administrators and teachers (Bempechat et al, 1989). They work at home on their children urging them to work hard, looking over their shoulders, and checking on their academic progress. They blame themselves if their children are not doing well academically and take responsibility for rectifying the situation.

Asian-American parents believe that the child should not receive rewards for behaviors they are expected to demonstrate, including good grades. Accomplishments are usually acknowledged in the form of parent encouragement to do even better and strive for higher levels of achievement (Morrow, 1989). In Schneider and Lee's study (1990), some Asian-American students complained, "I got seven A's and two B's last time, but my parents still told me to try harder. I cannot believe it." "If I get a B, my parents say it isn't that good. They get mad. They want all A's." "My parents say a B isn't very good. And now you can imagine what they would say if I got a C."

Parents' Sacrifice and Guilt Induction

Many Asian-American parents do make unbelievable sacrifices for their children. Especially among the newly-immigrated families, quite a few were professionals in their home countries and they could only take entry level jobs in this country and support their children's education in every way possible. However, they often use guilt

induction by urging their children to consider the negative impact of their low grades on other family members. Very often Asian-American students find it so difficult to please their parents that the psychological pressure results in terrible test anxiety. Many Asian-American students have apparent physical symptoms before and after tests (Pang, 1990). Their White classmates would think these Asian-Americans are paranoiac when they keep discussing with their White classmates about the test. They would say,"Give me a break. It's over and I don't want to talk about it." The worse part of guilt induction is that the complex interpersonal process transforms over a period of time into intrapersonal process. The need for approval through doing well becomes internalized and children are typically unaware of the process (Pang, 1990).

Some Asian-American parents punish their children for culturally unacceptable behaviors. Failure to meet parental expectation for academic achievement is, sometimes, considered a legitimate reason for punishment, even harsh punishment (Morrow & McBride, 1988). Children have to face ridicule and rejection. Forms of punishment include isolating the child from the family social life and verbal abuse. Children are often shamed and scolded for the "loss of face" which results from their failure to fulfill the primary obligation to the family.

A large number of Asian-American students have a difficult time dealing with negative feelings of being a "loser". Some feel guilty because they couldn't meet their parents' expectation or because they believe their parents have given up on them. According to Romeria Tidwell's study (1980), Asian-American children show a disturbing pattern of generally lower levels of self-esteem than White and Black American children (Pang, 1990).

Stereotyped Images and Unrealistic Expectation

Many White teachers lack both contact with Asian-American minority groups and knowledge about Asian cultures. They interpret the behavior of Asian-American students through racial stereotypes. They more readily attribute Asian-American students' behaviors to racial "characteristics" than to such individual factors as

personality and background (Pine, 1990). They assume that children from certain Asian-American groups will be top achievers. For instance, a Japanese-American student was told by his White teacher, "Your sister was an A student--why do you only get C's? You are not trying." This kind of unrealistic expectation from teachers makes the situation even more devastating for Asian-American students. The impact of being a member of a visibly different minority group already has a forceful effect on the developing self image of children. In dealing with the powerful process of assimilation, mixed messages regarding Asian-American students' acceptance into mainstream society can be an extra heavy burden for them to carry (Pang, 1990). They feel puzzled and find it difficult to understand, when the larger society places emphasis on individual functioning and egalitarian relationships, why both their parents and teachers confine them to hierarchical role structures and treat them differently. They feel lost in the turmoil of psychological assimilation and acculturation because they are unable to follow either the group's typical pattern or the acceptable pattern of the larger society.

Asian cultures believe that children should suppress and hide their feelings. Inability to control one's emotions is likely to be viewed as a sign of abnormality. Many Asian-American students would hesitate to seek help from counseling. The Confucian ethical code tells them that parents and other family members are the most, if not the only, trustworthy people to go for help. When they find themselves at odds with the larger society and, at the same time, out of tune with their parents, they feel extremely isolated and desperate. Teachers must be aware that Asian-American students may be, as a whole, far less well-adjusted and competent than teachers assume. A conscientious effort must be made to help Asian-American students solve their problems and develop more positive perceptions of themselves.

To sum up, Asian-American families have strong influence on their children's education; Asian cultures are very different from American culture. There is no other way for school personnel to reach out to their cultures than building communication with Asian-American families. Only through communication with them can we establish mutual understanding and mitigate the harm stereotyped images could do to our work of pursuing educational equality for all students in our democratic society.

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